

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on Storm Recovery Efforts and an Exchange With Reporters in Aptos, California

January 19, 2023

The President. Well, Governor, you and I have got to stop taking these helicopter rides. We've made a bunch of them. You've been hit—if anybody doubts the climate is changing, then they must have been asleep for the last couple of years.

I want to thank you, Governor. You and I, along with the Vice President, have been in close touch since this storm hit and even before it hit, when we were talking about it coming. We told the Governor that we'd do everything we can, whatever he needs. But he's been through a whole hell of a lot.

I don't know what, we had three or four flights up and down the State for the wildfires and the damage done. And it's been astounding what you've done.

And I want to say what I said then, and I'll say again: The Federal Government is not leaving its responsibility until it's all fixed, it's done.

You know, Mr. Mayor—or, Madam Mayor, I want to thank you and the county supervisors and local officials, the first responders for all that you have done and all you have been dealing with to try to protect your constituents in a way that gives them some—I guess, maybe the thing that's most needed in these times is a sense of hope that everything is going to be able to get done, everything is going to be able to be fixed.

And I want to thank the entire California delegation for working with my administration. Alex and Jimmy, thank you for you—what you've done, being with me today.

And you know, we did an aerial tour of the damage. And unlike when we did the aerial tour of the fires, it's not as obvious from the air just how much damage has been done. You get—we flew over the entire area and parts of the State—the entire—you know, they got more rainfall in a single day than they get in an entire year in parts of the State.

Drenching rains, powerful winds, floods, landslides, but you don't feel it till you walk the streets or what—when you're able to walk. And you know, as—you know, toppling of thousands of trees.

Twenty thousand customers—200,000 customers lost their power through the storms. Now it's less than 5,000, but it's still 5,000 people who don't have power. We've got to get it down to zero.

Nearly 150,000 people were under evacuation orders. Now it's down to 1,400 under evacuation orders. And under 300 people are still in shelters.

But, tragically, 21 people died. And that little boy, we're still trying to find. Everybody I've talked to so far today just spontaneously brings that up. You know, the fact is—you know, Jill and I have him in our prayers, the family in our prayers, and all of you.

You know, while the situation is still treacherous, we're cautiously optimistic that the worst part is behind. The waters recede, but we'll see the full extent of the damage to the homes, the businesses, and to farms and ranches.

And we now—we know some of the destruction is going to take years to fully recover and rebuild. But we've got to—just not rebuild, we've got to rebuild better. We've got to rebuild better.

Last week, I signed an expedited major disaster declaration for the State of California. Yesterday I directed the Federal Government that we'll cover 100 percent of the cost of removing debris and emergency measures like sheltering evacuees and paying overtime for first responders for the next 60 days.

[At this point, the President cleared his throat.]

Excuse me. For 60 days.

And right now more than 500 employees of FEMA are out here—and other Federal agencies—on the ground trying to help people. FEMA positioned supplies for 100,000 meals, 100,000 liters of water, 20,000 blankets, 10,000 cots for shelters.

And—will be disaster recovery centers in every impacted area, including in Santa Cruz and Merced, where survivors can apply for assistance and if their homes or their small businesses have been damaged. That's already underway.

The Army Corps of Engineers is helping to remove heavy debris and—safely and monitoring seven reservoirs in the Central Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area. I've instructed my administration to bring every element—every element—of the Federal Government together with the help of immediate needs to long-term rebuilding, to do both.

We have to—in terms of the infrastructure, there's got to be significant changes being made. And the Federal Government's going to be here to help get that done.

For example, the Department of Agriculture is helping farmers with disaster loans and grants if they lost livestock or their crops were washed away. The Small Business Administration—and some of you were with me when I just went through the small businesses along the piers here; it's devastating what happened, but they're going to get help—help local businesses with low-interest loans so they can recover.

And now, if you have—if you don't have insurance or if you're underinsured, FEMA is going to get you started on home repairs and replacing lost or damaged property like cars or refrigerators, things inside the home that will be able to be replaced quickly. To apply for assistance from FEMA, you can go online to disasterassistance.gov—disasterassistance.gov.

You can also sign up in person for disaster recovery centers in the coming days. There are going to be at least seven centers opened across this State, and FEMA is going to deploy Disaster Survivor Assistance teams to communities that need them the most. We can go to the FEMA website to find that location.

And look, as I've said on other disasters, the key is not just building back, it's building back stronger. Just because—since I became President, we've spent \$9 billion in disaster assistance to California for the extreme weather events they've had to go through. Nine billion.

And these weeks have shown the compounding effect of the disasters. For example, places that were ravaged by past wildfires are now at a higher risk of landslides. Extreme weather caused by climate change means stronger and more frequent storms, more intense droughts, longer wildfire seasons, all of which threaten communities across California. So we have to invest in stronger infrastructure to lessen the impacts of these disasters, because they become cumulative, in a sense.

We've already allocated funding from the infrastructure law that I signed a year ago and more than \$16 billion for more than 480 projects across this State. We're making the California

power grid more resilient, building stronger levees, clearing hazardous fuels, and reforesting lands, protecting—to protect against wildfires.

And together, we can better prepare for future disasters, reduce the damage they cause, and [protect; White House correction] the people's lives and the livelihoods that are affected.

So let me close with this. To the people in California, I say it again: The country is here for you and with you. We are not leaving till things are built back and built back better than they were before. You can recover from storms. We'll be with you every step of the way—and I mean that sincerely—every step.

And God bless you all, and may God protect our first responders, who we owe more than I can take time to talk about today.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Classified Documents Found at the President's Private Residence and Former Office

Q. Mr. President, may I ask you a question about the classified documents, sir? Do you have any regret—regret, sir?

The President. You know, the only—I will answer the question, but here's the deal: You know, what quite frankly bugs me is that we have a serious problem here we're talking about. We're talking about what's going on. And the American people don't quite understand why you don't ask me questions about that.

But having said that, what's your question?

Q. Do you have any regret, sir, that you did not reveal the existence of the documents back in November, before the midterms?

The President. Just hang on, okay?

Look, as we found—we found a handful of documents that were failed—were filed in the wrong place. We immediately turned them over to the Archives and the Justice Department. We're fully cooperating and looking forward to getting this resolved quickly.

I think you're going to find there's nothing there. I have no regrets. I'm following what the lawyers have told me they want me to do. It's exactly what we're doing. There is no there there.

Thank you. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:55 p.m. at Seacliff State Beach. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Gavin C. Newsom of California, who introduced the President; Mayor Margaux Keiser of Capitola, CA; Supervisors Manu Koenig, Zach Friend, Justin Cummings, Felipe Hernandez, and Bruce McPherson of Santa Cruz County, CA; Sen. Alejandro "Alex" Padilla; Rep. James V. Panetta; and Kyle Doan, a 5-year-old boy who was swept away from his mother Lindsay Doan by floodwaters in San Luis Obispo County, CA, on January 9.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Storm recovery efforts in Aptos, CA; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, Aptos, CA.

Locations: Aptos, CA.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Cummings, Justin; Doan, Kyle; Friend, Zach; Harris, Kamala D.; Hernandez, Felipe; Keiser, Margaux; Koenig, Manu; McPherson, Bruce; Newsom, Gavin C.; Padilla, Alejandro; Panetta, James V.

Subjects: Army Corps of Engineers, U.S.; California, disaster assistance; California, flooding damage and recovery efforts; California, Governor; California, President's visit; Classified national security information; Department of Justice, investigation into misplaced classified documents; Disaster assistance to States; Disaster assistance, California; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); First responders, service and dedication; Infrastructure improvements; National Archives and Records Administration; Natural disasters, California flooding; Natural disasters, climate change impacts; Small Business Administration; Small businesses, low interest loans; Vice President; Wildfires, damage and recovery efforts.

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